

Style

Philadelphia Museum photography exhibit ‘Unsettled’

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It is nearly half a year since the Smithsonian Institution bowed to congressional pressure and ordered the removal of an exhibited artwork deemed offensive by a religious group. But the [“Fire in My Belly” controversy](#) continues to spur reflections on the tensions between government, religious conservatism and freedom of expression in the arts.

Prompted by that controversy, the Philadelphia Museum of Art has mounted a photography exhibition that looks back to the so-called culture wars of the late 1970s through the 1990s, when social conservatives fought to prevent tax money from supporting art that dealt with homosexuality, feminism, racism or other contentious issues.

“Unsettled: Photography and Politics in Contemporary Art” is not a comprehensive overview of the culture wars. Only three of the nine artists were central to the debates in that earlier period, and none of their most inflammatory works is included. But the exhibition is a timely response to the Smithsonian flap and a chance for younger viewers to learn about previous clashes between religious conservatives and advocates of freedom of expression in the arts.

In the Smithsonian case, the banned work, a grainy amateurish film by the late David Wojnarowicz, was part of the National Portrait Gallery exhibition [“Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture,”](#) the first U.S. museum survey of modern portrayals of homosexual identity.

Portions of the film included brief scenes of ants crawling on a plastic crucifix that the Catholic League declared “hate speech disguised as art,” as though Christ has not endured far worse in the annals of art history. The film is no love letter to the Catholic Church — an institution that condemns homosexuality and ignored the AIDS crisis that inspired the work — but neither is its allegorical imagery inappropriate for an art exhibition.

That did not stop Rep. Eric Cantor (R-Va.), the incoming majority leader of the House at the time, from calling the show “an obvious attempt to offend Christians.” John A. Boehner (R-Ohio), the incoming speaker, warned that unless corrective action was taken, Congress would penalize the Smithsonian financially.

It seemed a good moment for the head of the Smithsonian, G. Wayne Clough, to reject legislative meddling in aesthetic affairs and cite the First Amendment’s protection of free speech. But Congress holds the purse strings for roughly 70 percent of the Smithsonian’s billion-dollar budget, and with the government considering drastic cuts to reduce the deficit, Clough told the museum director to pull the film.

The art world cried censorship, and museums and galleries across the country immediately screened versions of the forbidden work in protest. The Philadelphia show is a kind of prequel to that scandal.

The culture wars revisited

It is remarkable how closely the government interference with the National Portrait Gallery parallels the events of 1989. That year the Corcoran Gallery of Art, fearing congressional reprisals, canceled a Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective that included sexually explicit photographs. And Andres Serrano’s photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in yellow

fluid — he dubbed it “Immersion (Piss Christ)” — drew vehement fire from the Christian right.

“Piss Christ” had won a North Carolina contemporary art contest fractionally funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and Christian fundamentalists demanded an end to federal arts funding. It didn’t matter that Serrano, a Catholic, intended the submersion of the dime-store icon as a critique of the degrading commercialization of religious sentiment.

Congress added a requirement that in making grants the NEA consider not only artistic merit, but also “general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs of the American public.”

Concerns with “decency” led the NEA to rescind grants to performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes and Tim Miller, whose work includes vignettes about sexual identity. The “NEA Four” sued the agency and its director in federal court and in 1993 won restitution of the reneged grant money. They proceeded to challenge the “decency clause” as unconstitutional. The Supreme Court affirmed the content restriction, but weakened its efficacy by underlining that the statute is “advisory” and not mandatory. The victory proved Pyrrhic: By 1998 Congress had forced the NEA to abolish grants to individual artists altogether.

There would be more incidents before the latest debacle, typically involving politicians reiterating Catholic groups’ baseless charges of blasphemy. The hypocrisy is astonishing: The same legislators who for decades permitted the Catholic Church to self-police its pedophilia-plagued priesthood piously express anger over alleged affronts to public decency by artists whose work they misunderstand. As the Nobel Prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis wrote, “When Fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying the cross.”

Unsettling Images

In the Philadelphia show, some of this context is laid out in wall labels accompanying works by Wojnarowicz, Mapplethorpe and Serrano.

Wojnarowicz's "Sex Series," for example, was his response to public indifference and the Reagan administration's inaction in the face of the AIDS crisis. The artist, already infected with the disease that would kill him, appropriated stock images of an ocean liner, New York City and a forest and added circular inserts of sex acts, police aggression at gay protests and microscopic images of blood cells (AIDS is blood-borne) along with cuttings of news articles about gay bashing.

The label recounts that in 1990 the series was in an exhibition partially funded by the NEA, and that the Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association used details from the work in mass mailings calling for an end to arts funding (and asking for donations toward that effort).

Wojnarowicz sued for copyright infringement and libel and won a symbolic settlement of \$1.

[The Mapplethorpe saga](#) is recounted alongside his images of two men kissing and a nude African American man seen from behind. Despite a parental advisory at the entrance, that's about it for nudity in the show, other than Nan Goldin's photo of a girl in the shower — pretty tame by today's loosened standards. Goldin and Peter Hujar document the bohemian demimonde and gay cultures to which they belonged. They trained a sympathetic lens on dissipated youth and shunned AIDS sufferers, much as Mapplethorpe revealed the unseen world of sado-masochism (totally excluded from this show).

Serrano is represented not by "Piss Christ" but by a large color photograph of the hooded head of a Ku Klux Klansman — an actual Klan member

stupid enough to pose for a photograph that provides evidence writ large that the civil rights movement has some way to go.

Racism underlies also the black-and-white photographs by [Carrie Mae Weems](#). One shows a young woman sitting at a diner booth and staring at the camera with a look of defiance and mild disgust as she holds up a chicken leg. The caption reads, “Colored Woman With Fried Chicken.” Other portraits are captioned with descriptions of skin color — “Golden Yella Girl,” “Honey Colored Boy” — and tinged accordingly, calling attention to the color-coded mores within the African American community.

I’m not sure why [Zoe Leonard](#) is here. She belonged to AIDS activist and feminist groups, but her photographs are William Eggleston-style catalogues of bleak ephemera — a woman’s scarred belly, a ratty wig, love-themed graffiti in dreary cityscapes — unsettling in mood, but more quotidian than provocative.

[Barbara Kruger’s](#) red-framed gritty black-and-white images, overlaid with blaring advertising-style lettering, always have the feel of protest. A billboard-size photo of a starlet’s face reflected in mirror shards is emblazoned with the legend “We Are Your Circumstantial Evidence,” a comment perhaps on violence against women, possibly self-inflicted, but as often her message is unclear.

With protest art, the issues tend to be more interesting than the artworks. And like the culture wars themselves, the issues addressed by the works in this exhibition have been ameliorated but remain unresolved. Racism, sexism and homophobia linger, and skirmishes in the culture wars still flare up here and abroad.

The weekend before last, Serrano’s “Piss Christ” — which perennially

scandalizes audiences around the world — [was attacked](#) by zealots in Avignon, France, where the archbishop had labeled it “trash.” Hundreds marched on the museum and the next day extremists smashed the photograph’s plexiglass covering. The museum chose to leave the damaged work on view, a reminder to visitors of the intolerance and barbarity that roils beneath the veneer of civility in an enlightened Western democracy.

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Unsettled: Photography and Politics in Contemporary Art

at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through Aug. 21.

 **4 Comments**